

Charles de Foucauld



by M R Hoste

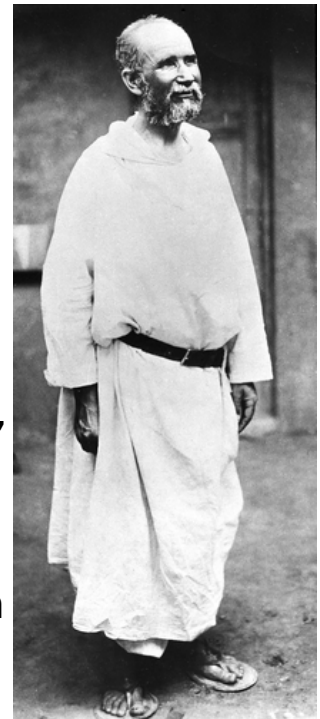
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Paris and North Africa

Charles de Foucauld's name will always be connected with the Sahara and, in particular, with the Touaregs, that remote and little known race of men, for whom he was content to sacrifice himself. The last years of his life were spent among them, in work for their present and future welfare, both temporal and spiritual. He had little or no hope of immediate conversions among them, but it was much, he considered, that the Blessed Sacrament should be in the midst of them, and Mass said daily in his little chapel. By prayer and penance, and by his labours in compiling a Touareg dictionary and grammar and other books on which the successors he hoped for would be able to rely, he strove to lay the foundations of the future Christianising of the race, and he sealed his labours with his blood - an end which he had earnestly desired.



His career was unusual, even when he was in the world, and it developed in unlooked-for directions. He came of an old French noble family, with traditions of service dating back to the Crusades, and even beyond. It is recorded that a de Foucauld, in the tenth century, after endowing certain abbeys with part of his property, left the world and retired into a monastery that he might there prepare to meet death. During the French Revolution, another of his name, Armand de Foucauld, a priest, was martyred by the side of his cousin, Jean-Marie de Lau, Prince-Archbishop of Arles, in the garden of the Carmelite monastery in Paris. It was of such stuff that Charles de Foucauld was made. Born on September 15th, 1858, he lost both his parents before he

was six years old, and was brought up by his grandfather, who was then nearly seventy, and perhaps did not set himself seriously to control his little grandson's passionate temper and self-will. But the first lessons in religion which had been begun by his mother were continued, and he himself recalls in his letters the fervour with which he made his First Communion. The trouble which severed him for several years from all practices of religion and robbed him of his faith dated from his schooldays. His grandfather had been obliged to leave his home at Strasburg on account of the war of 1870. He settled at Nancy, and Charles attended the Lycée. There he began to get slack and lazy, and the neutral attitude of his masters towards religion had its natural effect upon a boy of that age, especially as he lacked the home influences which might have counteracted it.

In looking back on those wasted years, de Foucauld saw very clearly how it was that he went wrong intellectually, and how easily he might have been spared years of doubt and sin. I will quote his own words, for I can echo them. from my own experience as a girl at the University, and in later life, and I am sure that they are true of numbers of young people at the present day:

"If you knew how all the objections which tormented me, which estrange young people, are luminously and simply resolved in good Christian philosophy! In my own case, when I saw it, I underwent a revolution. But children are thrown out into the world without being supplied with the weapons which are indispensable for fighting the enemies which they find in themselves and outside themselves, and which await them in a crowd on the threshold of youth. Christian philosophers have resolved long ago, and very clearly, questions which every young man puts feverishly to himself without

suspecting that the answer exists, clear and luminous, and is not far to seek."

It is true that a Catholic boy or girl has the help of the priest in the confessional, but sometimes they give up going to confession at the age when they most need it, either from carelessness or because they dislike being questioned and resent what they consider interference, and then things go from bad to worse.

In a subsequent letter to his brother-in-law, de Foucauld begs him not to repeat the mistake which he felt had been made in his own case. (Letter dated March 5th, 1901):

"I never had any bad master - all on the contrary were very reverent - even those do harm by the fact that they are neutral and because youth needs to be instructed not by neutrals but by believing and holy souls, and also by men who are learned in matters of religion, and can give an account of their beliefs and inspire young men with firm confidence in the truth of their faith Let my experience suffice for the family, I entreat you."

Charles de Foucauld had an inglorious career at the military school of St Cyr, which, to the grief of his grandfather, he entered at the bottom of the list. He was nearly rejected on the ground of being prematurely too fat. When there he did not bother to work, but just did the minimum and passed on, in 1878, to the Cavalry School at Saumur, where he shared a room with a companion as idle and dissipated as himself. There was little or nothing at this time to foreshow what he afterwards became. But, like Ernest Renan, he had a great respect for priests, and writing many years afterwards (Easter Monday, 1890) he expressed this in a letter to a friend:

"I must say that I brought away from that boarding-school such a deep respect for the Jesuits that, even at the time when I had least respect for our holy religion, I still kept a very deep respect for the Fathers, and that is no small advantage."

In 1880 the 4th Hussars, whose name was changed to the 4th Chasseurs d'Afrique, were ordered to Algeria. While there, de Foucauld refused to yield to his Colonel on a point of discipline in which his moral conduct was involved, and asked to be put temporarily out of active service. For good or for evil, he was possessed of an iron will and now he preferred to damage his career rather than give in. But a rising among the tribes in South Oranais, fomented by a native teacher, Bu-Amama, roused in him nobler instincts, and he petitioned to be allowed to rejoin his regiment, declaring that he could not bear the thought of his fellows being in honour and in danger while he himself kept aloof. He therefore declared himself ready to submit to any conditions, and rejoined his regiment on the fighting front. General Laperrine, of whom we shall often hear again in this story, was also of the expedition, and he afterwards wrote of de Foucauld, as he was at this time, in his book, *Etapas de la conversion d'un houzard* (Stages in the conversion of a Hussar):

"In the midst of the dangers and privations of the expeditionary columns, this cultured voluptuary revealed himself as a soldier and a leader; cheerfully enduring extreme hardships, never sparing himself, devoting himself to his men, he won the admiration of the old Mexicans of the regiment who were connoisseurs in such matters. Nothing remained of the de Foucauld of Saumur and Pont-a-Mousson but a choice little edition of Aristophanes, which never left him, and just a small trace of 'side,' which stopped him from

smoking when he couldn't get cigars of his favourite brand."

One of the soldiers who served under him afterwards told René Bazin, de Foucauld's biographer the following story:

The soldiers, exhausted by a long march and dying of thirst, were bidden halt, and immediately rushed to a well to moisten their parched throats with the brackish water. De Foucauld rapidly procured a bottle of rum from the canteen, and gave it to them to mix with the water, exclaiming at the same time, "How glad I am to have that bottle of mine to give you!" "He knew how to make himself loved," was the veteran's comment, "but that was because he loved his men."

When the expedition was concluded, he asked for leave to absent himself, as he wanted to study the Arabs in the South, and as it was refused he resigned his commission and settled for the time being at Algiers, in order to make the necessary preparations for his famous journey through Morocco. This was a most daring scheme, and one of exceedingly great danger and difficulty. At that time Morocco was practically closed to Christians, and death might have been the result if he had been betrayed. But he never seems to have known what fear was, and he was bent on satisfying his curiosity about this practically unknown country. De Foucauld knew how helpful to the French the statistics, which he hoped to obtain, might be later on, and he spared no pains or expense in providing himself with all that was necessary for a survey. His get-up was so successful that on one occasion, before he had crossed the frontier, when a party of the officers of the 4th Chasseurs were passing on horseback, and one of them remarked with a yawn to his companions that the little Jew who was squatting on the ground, eating olives, looked very much

like a monkey, neither he nor any of the others recognised their former brother-officer. De Foucauld's guide and mentor was a Jew named Mardochée, who knew the ins and outs of Morocco. In his company he penetrated to places where no European foot had trod hitherto, and was able to make all sorts of scientific investigations, likely to be of very great use to travellers, and specially to his compatriots in future times.

He listened with interest to Mardochée's romancing in the style of Ulysses about his own personal antecedents, and once asked him why he had lied so unnecessarily. He was told that it was to get practice in the art! When he returned to Paris, in April, 1885, the results of his exploration were published under the title of *Reconnaissance au Maroc*; there was also a second part, entitled *Renseignements* (Information). This second part contained detailed information about the various tribes and their divisions, how many guns, how many horses they possessed, the rivers and their tributaries, the roads, etc., etc., and towards the end there is a study of the Jews of Morocco. The work was reviewed and spoken of in the highest terms of praise in Paris and elsewhere, and it has been of great service to the French in their subsequent operations in Morocco, and won for the author the first gold medal of the Geographical Society. Its effect on Charles de Foucauld himself was profound. It carried much further the work of his eight months' campaign against Bu-Amama. He had learned to be patient, self-controlled, laborious, mortified, and altruistic. Before returning to France he made an expedition through the desert, with one Arab servant.

While thus engaged de Foucauld had had time to think, and to look into himself. Like Ernest Psichari, he had been deeply impressed by the devout way in which the Arabs prayed. The Jews too in Morocco, in spite of all their faults - the lies

which they told and the thefts and cheating which he witnessed - were at least devout. He entertained the idea at one time of becoming a Mussulman, but like Psichari, he discarded it, as it seemed to him too material a religion. He could not really prefer it to what he had seen in France of the Catholic religion, in which he had himself been baptised and brought up, but perhaps he thought that burden too heavy, that yoke anything but light. Yet fortunately for him his friends in Paris were Catholics, and good Catholics, and the beauty and consistency of their lives impressed him deeply. His aunt, his cousins, and his dearly-loved sister, all lived their faith, and one day he had the good fortune to meet the Abbé Huvelin, that holy priest who was to complete the work of his conversion, and guide him for so many years through the strange paths of his future life in the various continents of the world. De Foucauld sought him out in the confessional, but at first he did not kneel to unburden his soul of its load of sin. He merely bent down and said:

"Monsieur l'Abbé, I have not the faith; I have come to ask you to instruct me."

The Abbé replied by bidding him kneel down and make his confession to God; adding, "You will believe."

De Foucauld protested, "But I did not come for that."

"Make your confession" was the reply, and then and there de Foucauld unburdened himself of the sins of his whole life, and since he was still fasting, was bidden to go and receive Communion. He had crossed the Rubicon and now for him there was to be no hesitation in his upward progress to sainthood; in fact, he realised at once that it was to the religious life that God had called him, but the direction which that life would take was only gradually disclosed to

him and to his director. At first he made little or no outward alteration in his life, but the expression of his face had changed, now that he was at peace within. He went on with his task of correcting the voluminous proofs of his book, the manuscript of which he had completed in the early part of the year 1888. His book came out and won him instant renown among scholars and experts, no less than among the throng of general readers. For himself, his one thought now was to consecrate to the service of God all his gifts and aptitudes, even his very life blood, if need be. Solitude had always had a great attraction for him, he had learnt to love it in the desert, that school of thought and prayer in which Psichari's soul was awakened, and now he decided to make a journey to Palestine and place his footsteps there in those of Our Lord. He would there be able to think and pray undisturbed, indeed there would be everything to feed his devotion.

He set out in November 1888, and reached Jerusalem in December of the same year. Christmas was spent in Bethlehem, then, on horseback, attended by one servant mounted on a pack-horse, he penetrated into Galilee. There was something attractive to him about the white houses and steep streets of Nazareth. He became inspired with the love of the humble and hidden life led there by the Son of God for thirty years. This pilgrimage was to have a profound influence on his future career. He returned to Paris in the month of March in the following year. He was able now to give much time to study, and to drink deep draughts from the over-flowing river of Catholic truth. How shallow the streams of human speculation seem in comparison! Only those who have been through the experience can realise what it means to find one's doubts and misgivings fade away in the blazing sunlight of mid-day; like the Sacramental Presence in our midst it may seem at first almost too good to be true. But the daily or frequent

reception of Holy Communion, and the inward witness of a heart at rest, confirm the verdict of the reason and produce a harmony of belief and experience that nothing in heaven or earth seems able to shake.

Every morning now de Foucauld knelt at Mass and received Communion from the hands of the Abbé Huvelin, and all the while he was meditating on the question of his vocation, and debating for which of the order she was destined. During this year he made four retreats with the object of solving the problem, and the answer he received from all those priests whom he consulted in confession was the same as that of the Abbé Huvelin - it was to the life of a Trappist that he was called, with its rule of perpetual silence and hard penance. But de Foucauld was not of a temper to shrink from any sacrifice, even from the severance with his earthly ties, specially that which united him to his sister, the playmate of his childhood; indeed, he wrote to her that his own heart echoed the decision of his counsellors. At some date in the near future, when he had had time to arrange his affairs and take his farewell of her, he would quietly withdraw from the world without announcing his intention publicly, and retire to the Monastery of Notre Dame des Neiges (Our Lady of the Snows), at which he had already made a retreat. He requested to be sent after a certain period of postulancy and novitiate to the more distant Monastery of La Trappe d'Akbès in Syria, if such should be, as he believed, the will of His Heavenly Father.

He passed a week in December of that same year with his sister and her husband at Dijon, returned to Paris to wind up his affairs and make over his property to his sister, and then disappeared, having written this farewell letter to her the day before he left:

"Au revoir, dear Mimi, I leave Paris tomorrow; the day after, about two o'clock, I shall be at Our Lady of the Snows. Pray for me, I will pray for you, and for yours. We do not forget each other when we draw nearer to God."

The Religious Life - La Trappe, Nazareth, and Jerusalem

The first part of the Viscount de Foucauld's new life was spent at Notre Dame des Neiges, in prayer, silence, and labour, according to the Trappist traditions. He entered upon his novitiate on January 16th, 1890. He makes very light of the hardships of the Trappist rule; at that time only one meal was taken in the day during Lent, and that not until 4.30 p.m., but he declared that he considered this arrangement "agreeable and convenient," and never suffered from hunger. It was the separation from those he loved, especially his sister, that he found the most painful, and this suffering was increased by his subsequent departure, willed by himself, to the monastery of Notre Dame du Sacré Coeur (Our Lady of the Sacred Heart) in Syria. I give in his own words a description of how his time was employed there:

"The manual labours are these: to harvest cotton, carry stones which are in the fields and make heaps of them in places where they will not be in the way, wash, saw wood. One never knows before the work what one will have to do. At the hour for work a little block of wood is struck, the choir monks meet in a little room where the aprons and sabots are, the Superior assigns the work to each. Since I have been here, I have spent two, sometimes three days a week in washing, the remainder in working in the fields; there my usual work is to clear the soil of the stones which encumber it, and to carry them in baskets to the heaps When there are

special labours, such as crops to get in, I am sent to do them. I spent from eight to ten days in getting in potatoes, two or three gathering grapes, nearly three weeks harvesting cotton. In addition, the novices have the sweet service of sweeping out the church twice a week"

What a change for the ex-cavalry officer and explorer! But as he himself points out, in a passage I will quote from one of his letters, presumably to his sister, the external things of life do not matter. It is the foundation on which they are built that counts.

Let us pray for one another, that we may be faithful to what the good God wants of us, each in his own life. They seem very different, but that is only an appearance; when the good God forms the foundation of the life, as He ought to do, all lives are like each other, the rest is of little importance."

Frère Marie-Albéric, for so de Foucauld was now called, was professed on Candelmas day, February 2nd, 1892. The next day he wrote (after describing the ceremony of the tonsure which succeeded the taking of the vows):

"I no longer belong to myself at all. I am in a state that I have never experienced, except perhaps in a small degree. on my return from Jerusalem It is a need of retirement, of silence, to be at the feet of the good God and to gaze at Him almost in silence. One feels, one would wish to remain feeling indefinitely, without even saying it, that one belongs altogether to the good God and that He is altogether ours."

All the time, Frère Marie-Albéric was winning golden opinions. The Abbot spoke of him as an angel without wings,

and the Prior expressed to his sister, in a letter, his desire that he should Study for the priesthood. He was even spoken of as a future Superior. But as Frère Marie-Albéric confided to the Abbé Huvelin, his own ambitions did not rise above his present occupations. He did, however, begin to study theology, at the bidding of his Superior, but not without a protest. Yet he was not fully satisfied. An inward voice was urging him to yet deeper isolation, and he was haunted by the vision, never to be realised in his lifetime, of a company of kindred spirits who should have for their object the exact copying of the life of Our Lord, following literally the counsels, asking for nothing, giving freely, practising extreme self-denial, devoting much time to prayer, and living in heathen or forsaken countries. This dream was not encouraged by his spiritual director, who told him plainly that he was not at all fitted to lead others, and counselled delay. Finally, he quitted the order of the Trappists, and with the consent of his director, who saw that he was called to tread an unusual path, he went to the Holy Land to live in poverty and solitude the life of a hermit rather than a monk, as the servant of the Poor Clares of Nazareth and Jerusalem. It was the counsel of the Reverend Mother Abbess at Jerusalem that apparently decided him to aim at becoming a priest. Step by step his path became clear, and after he had been ordained at Viviers on June 9th, 1901, he said his first Mass at Notre Dame des Neiges on the 10th. His true vocation, for which all else had been a preparation, lay not in France but in Africa, but even now it was only partially disclosed to him. In a letter dated August 22nd, in the same summer, addressed to Monseigneur Bazin, of the White Fathers, Père de Foucauld sets forth very clearly his objects. I will quote it here, as it is the clue to his subsequent life in the desert:

(Charles de Foucauld to Monseigneur Bazin)
Trappe de Notre Dame des Neiges.

August 22nd, 1901.

Monseigneur,

I throw myself at your Grace's feet The thought of my comrades who died without Sacraments and without a priest, twenty years ago, in the expeditions against Bu-Amama, of which I formed a part, urges me extremely to start for the Sahara, as soon as you have granted me the necessary faculties, without a single day's delay, since a day gained may be the salvation of the soul of one of our soldiers. I also look upon it as a duty of charity to write to you again, that I may start as soon as possible.

I humbly ask two things of your Grace:

(1) The faculty to establish between Ain-Sefra and the Twat, in one of the French garrisons which have no priest, a small public oratory, with the Sacrament reserved for the needs of the sick, to reside there, and to administer the Sacraments there.

(2) The authorisation to associate with myself companions, priests or laymen, if Jesus sends me any such, and to practise there with them the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament exposed.

If you deign to grant me this two-fold request, I shall reside there, as chaplain of that humble oratory, without the title of parish priest or curate or chaplain, and without any subsidy, living as a monk, following the rule of Saint Augustine, either alone or with brethren, in prayer, poverty, labour, and charity, without preaching, without going out except to administer the Sacraments, in silence and enclosed.

The aim is to give spiritual help to our soldiers, to prevent their souls being lost for want of the Last Sacraments, and above all to sanctify the infidel populations by bringing into the midst of them the Presence of Jesus in the Most Holy Sacrament as Mary sanctified the house of John the Baptist when she carried Jesus into it.

I promise your Grace with all my heart to endeavour, with God's help, never, in spite of my wretchedness, to be an occasion of scandal, and never to be a cause of expense or material burden to your delegation; with all my heart I promise you in advance filial love and the most faithful obedience.

I take the liberty of adding very humbly that the presence in the Sahara of your unworthy servant, poor and wretched though he be, will probably save several souls who otherwise will die without the Sacraments, and will give to your delegation one more tabernacle, and one more Holy Sacrifice daily.

If your Grace wishes to speak to me, on a word from you, by post or telegraph, I will go immediately to Algiers.

I am, Monseigneur,
With the deepest respect,
Charles de Foucauld (an unworthy priest).

It was found afterwards that this letter should have been addressed to Monseigneur Guérin, Prefect Apostolic of the Sahara. The mistake was soon rectified, and a letter was also written to the Superior General of the White Fathers.

Charles de Foucauld got his wish, permission was accorded, and at the end of September he quitted the Trappists of

Notre Dame des Neiges, with whom he was no longer actually connected, and a few days after arrived in Africa. Monseigneur Guérin was only too glad to welcome such a man to his prefecture, and declared that he regarded his coming as a blessing from God, for, as he said, "A true saint, like Charles of Jesus, necessarily does good. He cannot help letting something of the sweetness and goodness of Jesus, who henceforth forms his whole life, radiate around him."

A favourable reply was also received from the Governor-General and the General in command of the Army Corps, and he was very warmly received by his military friends, who were very proud of the work he had done in Morocco, and most hospitably entertained by the General at Ain-Safra, though he did not avail himself of the bed provided for him, preferring the floor. He was given an escort, and met about half-way through his desert journey to Beni-Abbés, near Taghit, by Captain de Susbielle, who was in command of the station. He had said to his men on the way:

"You are going to see a French marabout (holy man), he comes from friendship for you; receive him with honour."

There was a very dramatic scene: when de Foucauld saw the representative of France, he rode forward to meet him, his white robes floating in the breeze, and halting when he had come within three feet of the Captain he replied to his salute. The Arabs dismounted and several of them, bending low, kissed the hem of de Foucauld's garment, recognising in him their would-be benefactor and friend. Four days later, in the cool of the evening, Charles de Foucauld caught the first sight of the palm-trees of his future home in the oasis of Beni Abbés.

A Solitary Vocation - Beni-Abbes

Missionaries in Africa find it very difficult to convert Mahommedans, and still more difficult to keep them true to their convictions when they have been converted - a less rare event than is generally believed. Everything seems against them. They cannot continue to live their former life, for they are outlaws and their very lives are in danger. The method which Père de Foucauld adopted, and which has been authoritatively pronounced the best, is to aim rather at gradually changing public opinion than at making individual conversions, and this end is best achieved by living among the Arabs, showing them all possible kindness and charity, and strengthening them in the practice of those truths of natural religion which they already hold. The principle is of very wide application, for surely that same peaceful penetration is our chief hope - after God - for the Conversion of England. It is not dramatic, it may be very disappointing, but in the long run it is effective.

Père de Foucauld supported his efforts by a life of extreme mortification. His food was such that no one cared to accept his freely-offered hospitality. He began by sleeping in his little chapel, stretched out on the ground before the altar like a dog before his master, but afterwards he found a less luxurious resting-place under an outside wall, or in a tiny cell where he was unable to lie at his full length. That was in imitation of Our Lord's cramped position on the cross. The wish to imitate in closest detail the circumstances of the earthly sufferings of Our Saviour moulded all his actions; he looked upon it as his vocation. Many were the weary steps he planted on the desert sand when he might have been riding on a camel like the rest of the caravan he was accompanying, but he thought of Our Lord's exhausting tramps over the hills and plains of Galilee, and persevered.

His heart was wrung, like Gordon's, by the sufferings of the slaves, who would pass his door in the caravans of their

raiders, and he would ransom them if he possibly could. He wrote to Monseigneur Guérin:

"Do not think that in my kind of life the hope of enjoying sooner the vision of the Beloved counts for anything; no, I only want one thing, and that is to do what pleases Him most. If I love fasting and watching, it is because Jesus has loved them so much; I envy Him His nights of prayer on the mountain-tops; I would like to keep Him company; the night is the hour of the tête-a-tête Alas! I am so cold that I dare not say I love; but I should like to love I That is why I love watching."

In the year 1903, Père de Foucauld had an opportunity of ministering to a ward full of wounded soldiers - members of the Foreign Legion. The French had had a sharp encounter with native tribesmen, and several on the French side had been killed and others wounded. When Père de Foucauld heard the news and had received permission from the authorities to betake himself to Taghit, where the wounded were in hospital, he set off alone, on horseback, and travelled all day and all night, arriving about nine o'clock in the morning. The distance covered was about seventy miles. He at once proceeded to say his Mass, and then asked to be taken to the wounded. He won the hearts of all by his kindness and sympathy, and his ministrations had a most happy effect upon them, physically as well as spiritually, for he raised their spirits, and cheered them by writing their letters for them and talking to them of their homes. Having been a soldier himself in Africa, in his earlier days, he understood them better than another priest could have done, and made friends of them all. All forty-five of them, so one of their officers told René Bazin, received Holy Communion from his hands. Once only did he leave them. That was on the day when he went to the scene of the

combat to bless the graves of the officers and men who had fallen there.

The Touaregs and the War - Tamanrasset

But Père de Foucauld was not destined to end his days in the beautiful oasis of Beni-Abbés, befriending French soldiers, and observing his self-imposed enclosure. No, a voice from remoter regions of the Sahara kept calling him, the voice of that strange Berber race, the race to which Saint Monica herself belonged. It urged him to come and dwell among them, obscure and ignorant as they were, and prepare the way for their conversion.

In 1904 he made his first visit to their country, and he definitely took up his abode at Tamanrasset among the Touaregs of the Hoggar in 1995.

One naturally asks who were the people that possessed. so strong an attraction for Père de Foucauld that he was willing to live and die in their service. Certainly in devoting himself to them he was following out an inward vocation, strengthened by the opinion of his friend. "Commandant" Laperrine, already quoted. But after that all-powerful reason for this new orientation of his life, Père de Foucauld was first influenced perhaps by what he had heard of the conduct of a Touareg woman, at the time of the disastrous defeat of Colonel Flatters, in the early days of the French conquest of the Sahara. She had vigorously resisted the killing of the French wounded, which had been on the point of being carried out, and had herself received them into her house and tended them, finally repatriating them at Tripoli. She was reputed to possess great influence, and was renowned for her charity; Père de Foucauld recognised in her a soul naturally Christian, and wished to visit and thank her. But I think, even before this, the thought of the Touaregs had

been present. to his mind and he had conceived the idea that they might be won ultimately to Christ, though he had no illusions about the immediate conversion of a race hitherto so isolated from civilisation that they were entrenched in self-conceit, and believed themselves to be far superior to their new lords, the French.

To be sure, these new-comers had wonderful mechanical inventions, they could fly through the sky in aeroplanes, but then, what was an aeroplane but a flying tent? they could send their voice over wide spaces by the radio, but of course the real agent was the wind and, after all, why try and improve on the old time-honoured system of sending messages by runners and crossing the desert on camels? The Touareg point of view was very human and natural, and one has heard the same kind of talk in remote country districts in England, in face of modern changes. It may be irritating but it is understandable, and best combated by indirect methods, as Père de Foucauld knew so well. Not that he cared whether the Touaregs adopted modern ways of thinking, and inventions, except as far as their civilisation would lead to their becoming Christians and increase in them respect for the French nation. What he aimed at was their conversion, and to this end he was willing to consecrate all his powers, with no hope at all of immediate success. The Touaregs profess the Mahornmedan religion, but are less strict in its observance than the Arabs, from whom they are quite distinct in race.

As regards supernatural methods of conversion, I think Père de Foucauld relied more on prayer and the Presence of the Blessed Sacrament, which his advent brought into the midst of the Sahara, than on anything else. He lost no opportunity of establishing friendly relations with these little known natives, and showed them all possible kindness. He hoped that in the future other missionaries would come - perhaps

he had almost ceased to expect them in his life-time - who would carry on the work which he had so much at heart, and for which he desired to give his life, as actually came to pass. He did not really consider himself a missionary, but rather a monk, and it was only from motives of charity that he mingled with the outside world. He loved solitude and was never, as he himself inadvertently confessed, really alone.

Beside his unfailing kindness and charity to the Touaregs, he set himself not only to master their language, but to write a dictionary of it and a grammar, for the use of his successors. The Touaregs have an unwritten literature of their own, consisting of poems that have come down to them from antiquity and others which they compose themselves; both of these they recite in their gatherings. These poems Père de Foucauld set himself to collect, as a basis for future study. He also translated the Gospels and other parts of the Bible into the language of the Touaregs.

What I have written is the briefest possible sketch of Père de Foucauld's work and life for this obscure race of the desert.

When the Great War came in 1914, he foresaw from the first that attempts would be made to stir up the native tribes against the French in their African domains, and he realised the importance of his presence as a calming and restraining force among them. "You know what it costs me," he wrote, "to be so far away from our soldiers and the frontier; but my duty is evidently to remain here, to help to keep the population calm. I shall not leave Tamanrasset until the peace."

That he might be absolutely sure that he was right in his decision, he wrote to his friend, General Laperrine, who had

formerly been in military command in the Sahara, and was now at the front, playing a leading part, asking:

"Should I not be more useful at the front, as chaplain or stretcher-bearer? If you do not write to me to come, I remain here till the peace; if you tell me to come, I start at once and quickly."

He waited two months for a reply. When it came, it confirmed not his inclinations, but his conviction that his place was in the Sahara - "Restez" (Stop where you are) was the billet he received.

At the beginning of the war, Père de Foucauld had been invited to seek protection in the fortified post of Motylinski, but this he refused to do. He felt sure that if he did not go to the front his place was among the people to whom his life was devoted. He maintained a correspondence with General Laperrine, in which he kept him informed of all that was going on in the district, so far as he knew of it, mentioning which tribes were friendly and which hostile, and drawing attention to the intrigues of the Senussi, who were closely connected with the Turks of Tripoli, and with the Germans. When he could, he supported the interests of the native tribes, to whose welfare he was devoted. If he knew there was danger of a rising, he would give » definite advice, and state what would be his own course of action. In 1915 he questioned General Laperrine about the death at the front of a Jesuit Father, and asked whether, if, as he gathered, the Church allowed priests to fight, he had better not take steps to enlist, unless it meant being shelved in a depot.

"Between the little that I am and zero, there is very little difference," he wrote, "but there are times when everybody ought to come forward Reply without delay; by the same post I am writing to ask whether the Church authorises anyone in my position to enlist."

On November 19th, 1915, he wrote:

The courier from Azjer has not yet come in. But I hear this; the Dehibat post of Tunis is attacked by the Senussi, commanded by officers in khaki uniforms, with field-glasses and revolvers (Germans, no doubt). General Monier has sent reinforcements. The situation is serious on all the Tunis-Tripoli frontier."

On April 10th, 1916:

My dear Laperrine, it appears that when you went with Musa to Fihrun's, on coming back from Niamey, Fihrun A proposed to Musa to assassinate you with your escort. As Musa refused, Fihrun reproached him with having no courage. Musa answered him: 'Thou followest thy way, I mine; in a few years from now, we shall see which of the two is better.'" (Musa was the Amenokal or chief of the Hoggar Touaregs, and Père de Foucauld had a high opinion of him in many ways.)

On April 11th, on hearing that the French fort of Janet, on the Tripoli frontier, had been taken by the Senussi, he wrote to Laperrine:

"The Senussi have the road free to come here. By this word 'here' I do not mean Tamanrasset, where I am alone, but Fort Motylinski, the capital of the country, which is thirty miles from Tamanrasset. If my advice is followed, we shall all come through if attacked. I have advised a retreat with all the munitions and stores to an impregnable place well supplied with water in the mountains, where we can hold out indefinitely and against which cannon is useless. If they do not follow my advice and are attacked, God knows what will happen But I think that they will follow my advice. I shall do everything in my power to get them to do so I

am in daily correspondence with the officer in command of Fort Motylinski, Sublieutenant Constant. If I think it useful, I shall go and pay him short visits, if he is attacked I shall join him We are all in the hands of God; only what He permits will happen."

On Whit-Monday, in 1916, he wrote to Monseigneur Bonnet, Bishop of Viviers:

"In body I am here, where I shall remain till peace comes, believing I am more useful here than elsewhere; but how often is my spirit in France, at the front, where the conflict must at this moment be more ardent than ever; or behind the lines, where so many families are weeping for what they hold most dear, or are in mortal anxiety. Around me, the native population remains calm and faithful, its attitude is excellent."

About three weeks after this letter was written, Père de Foucauld, in accordance with the wish of the military authorities, who were anxious to protect both himself and the faithful Touaregs and the Harratins (the mixed race of Arabs and blacks whom the Touaregs make use of as slaves to till the ground), moved to a small fortress which had been constructed according to his plans and under his direction. Every precaution had been taken to enable it to hold out if besieged. It was about twenty feet square, and was surrounded by a ditch over six feet deep. The walls were over six feet thick at the bottom and over sixteen feet high. The only outside opening was a very low door, which did not open directly into the fort, but into a narrow corridor in which was a second low door.

On June 16th, Père de Foucauld wrote:

"The Senussi danger appears to have been averted for the moment. Our Janet fort on the Tripoli frontier was taken by the Senussi on March 24th, and retaken by our troops on May 16th; our soldiers pursued the flying enemy. As long as the Italians have not retaken all the south of Tripoli, which they have evacuated, our Tripoli frontier will be menaced, and it will be necessary to watch it closely; let us hope that this will be done. Those regions are far away; when they are spoken of to the authorities living at Algiers, they only half believe what they are told, and only grant half what they are asked for, and only consent to take the necessary measures when an accident has happened."

A month later Père de Foucauld wrote a very calm and beautiful letter to his future biographer, René Bazin, in which he sums up the missionary ideals which guided his own noble and self-sacrificing life, and which he wished to teach others to follow. As a matter of fact, as has been said, he looked upon himself as a monk rather than a missionary, by vocation, but in the dearth of the companions whom he was never destined to welcome to the Sahara he had to combine the two ideals, and mix freely with men when he would have chosen to give his time more directly to God. But it is better to quote his own words:

"Isolated missionaries like myself are very rare. Their part is to prepare the way, so that the missions which will take their place may find a friendly and trustful population, souls in some degree prepared for Christianity and, if possible, a few Christians We must get ourselves accepted by the Mussulmans and become, in their eyes, the trusty friend to whom one goes when one is in doubt or trouble, on whose affection, wisdom, and justice one can count absolutely.

It is only when we arrive at that, that one can do any good to their souls.

"Therefore my life consists in entering into relations with my surroundings as much as possible, and in rendering every service that I can. In the degree that intimacy is established, I speak always, or almost always, in a tête-à-tête conversation, of the good God, briefly, giving to each one what he can bear; avoidance of sin, an act of perfect love, an act of perfect contrition, the two great commandments of the love of God and of our neighbour, examination of conscience, meditation in view of our last end, the duty of the creature to think of God, etc., giving to each according to his strength, and advancing slowly and prudently.

"There are very few isolated missionaries doing this work of breaking up the soil; I wish there were many of them."

Père de Foucauld had the interests of France strongly at heart, and he was of opinion that those interests lay in the Christianising of her African Empire.

On August 31st, Père de Foucauld chronicles with joy that the motor-road from Tamanrasset to In-Salah was nearly, if not quite, finished, and he adds: "The first motor that comes here will be a joy to me, it puts a finish to our taking possession of the country."

On September 1st, there is an interesting letter to General Mazel, who was then in command of the fifth army:

"The corner of the Sahara from which I write to you, my dear Mazel, is still calm. However, we are on the ground, on account of the increasing agitation of the Senussi in Tripoli. Our Touaregs here are faithful, but we

might be attacked by the Tripolitans;' I have transformed my hermitage into a little fort. There is nothing new under the sun; I think, when I look at my battlements, of the fortified convents and churches of the tenth century I have been entrusted with six cases of cartridges, and thirty Gras rifles, which remind me of the days of my youth."

On September 5th, he writes:

"Unfortunately the news from the Tripoli frontier is bad Without having suffered a check, our troops are falling back before the Senussi: they are not now on the frontier, but a long way this side of it; after capturing Janet, they have evacuated it; they have evacuated some other points. This retreat before a few hundred rifles is lamentable. There must be (how far up I do not know) some serious error in the command. It is clear that if we fall back without any fighting, the Senussi will advance. If the method is not promptly changed, they will get here some day. I regret worrying you again, but dear truth wills that I should tell you this."

In another letter, dated September 24th, he speaks of the faithful behaviour of the native population in face of disquieting rumours of an impending attack. "They gathered round the officer in command of the neighbouring fort and round me, ready to defend the fort and the hermitage. This faithfulness of theirs was very sweet to me, and I am very grateful to these poor people, who might have taken refuge in the mountains where they had nothing to fear, and who chose rather to shut themselves up in the neighbouring fort and in my hermitage, although they knew the enemy had cannon and that bombardment was certain."

It is really difficult to choose among the letters written by Père de Foucauld at this time and published in the life of him written by Rene' Bazin} These letters give an insight into what Père de Foucauld was thinking and feeling during these last months of his life. Death had no terrors for him - in fact, he looked forward to it, for he desired to die for the people for whom he had lived so hard and strenuous a life of prayer, labour, and self-denial. He looked to a future when that work could? be extended, and the confraternity which he had worked so hard to form during the last visit he paid to France in 1913 occupied his mind increasingly. On October 10th, he writes, in this connection:

"I look on the long months during which the war detains me in the Sahara as a time of retreat, during which I pray and reflect, asking Jesus to make known to me the definite form to be given to our confraternity."

On October 31st he chronicles a defeat of the Senussi, who had attacked a large re-victualling convoy, and a raid which had resulted in the loss of about a hundred camels, but which had been repelled, and in the same letter, addressed to General Laperrine, he writes:

"A rather big Senussi band of raiders were active in the north of Air; instead of raiding, they said to the people, 'Change your abode, and come and settle down for good with us at Fezzam, and we shall do you no harm at all; If you refuse, We shall raid you.'

"Some Kel-Air accepted and followed them in revolt; the Soudanese 'tirailleurs' of Agades overtook them, beat the Senussi, and brought back the rebels. Some Kel-Ahaggar who happened to be in the path of the raiding party of the Senussi, pretended to accept their terms, and followed them for a day or two; then at night they

managed to elude the watch kept on their movements. They set out by forced marches towards Adrar, and escaped out of their hands."

In a letter addressed to the Prioress of the Poor Clares of Nazareth, then in Malta, he wrote of his hopes for France, and tells her of his happiness in having the Blessed Sacrament reserved in his little chapel and being able to say Mass regularly every day.

"We live in days," he writes, "when the soul feels strongly the need of prayer. In the tempest which is blowing over Europe we feel the nothingness of the creature and we turn towards the Creator. In the boat tossed by the waves we turn to the Divine Master, and entreat Him who can give victory by a word, and make a great and lasting calm ensue. We stretch our arms towards heaven as Moses did when his people were fighting, and there where man is powerless we pray to Him who can do everything. Before the Blessed Sacrament, we feel so certainly the presence of real Being when all that is created appears so evidently to be touching the abyss."

The Death of Père de Foucauld

On the date of the last letter quoted, December 1st, 1916, Père de Foucauld was alone in the fort, in the evening, his servant being in the village. It was a favourable moment for a planned attack on the part of a band of the Senussi. Reinforced by some of those very Harratins whom the Father had befriended and helped, and by some of their Touareg masters, they came to his door. The Senussi were armed with Italian repeating rifles. Some were mounted on camels and these they made kneel down under the wall. Others were on foot. They had one man with them to whom the Father had been particularly kind, El Madani by name, and

they made use of him and his familiarity with the Father's habits and password to get him to open the door. They knocked and, when Père de Foucauld came to the door and asked who was there, they told him that it was the mail; and as this fitted in with his expectations he opened the door and put out his hand to receive the letters. It was immediately seized and held. Some of the Touaregs then sprang forward, seized and bound Père de Foucauld, and left him in the passage that ran between the fort and the wall that surrounded it, with a man armed with a gun to guard him. One cannot help thinking of the words of Our Lord; "Are you come out as against a thief, with swords and staves?" and like Him, Père de Foucauld remained silent, though closely questioned by his captors for news which they might find useful. Near him crouched his servant, Paul, who had been found and brought in. He was afterwards one of the chief witnesses for what happened. The Touaregs surrounded' Père de Foucauld while the fort was being plundered of arms and stores of food. They kept congratulating El Madani, who had betrayed his master, and promising him all sorts of delights in the next world as a reward for his treachery. Then suddenly the alarm was given. "There are the Arabs! There are the Arabs!" meaning the soldiers from the fort Motylinski. Père de Foucauld made an instinctive movement to warn them. They were coming to greet him, on their way through Tamanrasset, before returning to Motylinski. The Touaregs fired at both and both were killed. The Touareg who was watching Père de Foucauld brought the muzzle of his rifle close to his head and fired. Père de Foucauld uttered no word or cry, his body slowly slipped down on its side. His soul had passed away.

The Touaregs who had killed the two Arabs now returned and proceeded to strip the Father, and throw his body into the ditch which surrounded the fort. Some wished to hide the body, some to tie it to a tree, and let him become the

prey of the dogs belonging to the friendly Touareg, Chikkat. The murderers spent the night callously eating and drinking, and in the morning surprised and killed another soldier who was bringing the mail-bag from In-Salah, and tore up all its contents. They went away about mid-day, carrying off the booty. The Harratins who remained faithful helped Paul to bury the Father, and Paul then set out to report at Motylinski what had happened at the fort, arriving» there at noon on December 3rd.

Various reasons have been given for Père de Foucauld's death, such as hatred for the Roumis (Christians) which was being propagated by agents of the Senussi, although as a rule priests are exempt from death in accordance with the instructions of the Koran. It is possible that he was only killed on the spur of the moment, when the Arab soldiers appeared on the scene and he made a movement as if to warn them. It would have been of more profit to his captors to have kept him as a hostage. General Laperrine expressed his own opinion in the following note, which he dictated:

"In my opinion the assassination of the Reverend Père de Foucauld is to be connected with the letter found at Agades, in the papers of Kaucen, in which a European (Turk or German) advised Ithirn, as a first measure, before stirring up the populations, to kill or take as hostages Europeans known to have influence over the natives and native chiefs devoted to the French."

He expressed himself to a similar effect in a conversation he afterwards held with Père Nouet, of the White Fathers, who thus summed up what he said:

"Turkey, aided by Germany, wished to make the Touaregs, in the first place, then all the desert tribes, revolt against us. The agents of this policy very soon

perceived that their aim could not be attained if Père de Foucauld remained in the midst of the Northern Touaregs, whence his influence radiated. They decided to seize him and keep him as a hostage, but their resolution was not, according to the General, to put him to death."

The men at whose hands Père de Foucauld met his death were most probably allured by the hope of plunder and gain, but they were only the instrument of enemies in higher places, who had more far-reaching aims. According to the evidence afterwards given by Paul, it would seem that Père de Foucauld was asked to apostatise, and refused, and this test would be in accordance with Moslem custom. If he had been willing to avail himself of the shelter offered him at Motylinski he would never have been assassinated, but he preferred to remain among his people for whose benefit he had had the little fort erected.

No time was lost in pursuing the marauding band. They were overtaken and attacked on December 17th, and several men among them were killed. Then Captain. La Roche was able to visit the scene of the tragedy at Tamanrasset. As soon as he arrived he visited the graves, ordered the bodies to be covered with a thicker layer of earth, set up a wooden cross on Père de Foucauld's grave, and rendered military honours to those who had given their lives for France. Then he entered the fort where all was in confusion, as the robbers had overthrown and torn up or partly burnt all that they did not think it worth while to carry away.

Fortunately the four volumes of the Touareg dictionary and the two volumes of the poems he had collected could be put together again. Letters written and sealed by the Father, some of which have been quoted above, were lying ready

stamped. There was his rosary, the Stations of the Cross which he had traced out himself, and a wooden cross on which the Saviour's form was beautifully indicated. As the young officer was stirring the dust on the ground, upon which all sorts of things had been rudely tossed, he came across a monstrance containing the Blessed Sacrament. He raised it with reverence, wiped the dust from it, and carefully wrapped it in a linen cloth.

"I was very disturbed," he said afterwards, when relating his experience, "for I felt that it was not my place thus to carry the good God." But there was nothing else that he could do, so he reverently placed the little monstrance in front of him on the saddle of his camel and rode thus to the fortress of Motylinski, a distance of about thirty miles. As René Bazin remarks, this was the first procession of the Blessed Sacrament in the Sahara. Then, in accordance with a counsel Père de Foucauld had once given him as to how it would be best to act in such circumstances, he called a non-commissioned officer of the post, who had been a seminarist and remained an earnest Catholic, and after taking counsel with him, he put on some white gloves he had never worn before, and opened the monstrance. The Blessed Sacrament was there, as he had believed. Finally, after some hesitation as to which of the two should consume the sacred Host, the non-commissioned officer knelt down and made his Communion.

Epilogue

In 1917 General Laperrine visited Tamanrasset and had the body of his friend exhumed and re-buried on the top of the neighbouring hill, on which his fort stood, and a cross erected which could be seen from a long way off. The three native soldiers killed at the same time as himself were buried at his feet.

The General little thought then that he was to find a resting-place himself in the same spot. In February, 1920, he was crossing in an aeroplane the desert which he had so often traversed on a camel's back and, being caught in a fog, was brought to the ground. He was wounded in the fall, and died, after a few days of suffering from hunger and thirst, there in the desert. His body was wrapped in the linen of the aeroplane, put on the back of a camel, and buried close to that of Père de Foucauld.

But such was not the final resting-place of Père de Foucauld's remains. With the exception of his heart, which was placed in the monument of his friend, they were transferred' in April, 1929, to the Christian village of El Golea, where they rest in the keeping of the White Fathers and the first Christians of the desert. Immediately after his death his reputation for sanctity spread throughout the world, and steps have already been taken with a view to his canonisation. These last details are taken from a very interesting short sketch of his life by Monseigneur Boucher, President de l'OEuvre Pontificale de la Propagation de la Foi at Paris (Librarie Bloud et Gay). It is rendered doubly interesting by the illustrations which have been contributed by the relations and friends of Père de Foucauld.

From a paragraph in the *Catholic Fireside* (March 30th, 1934), written by "Pilgrim," we learn that the example of Père de Foucauld is being followed at the present time by five French priests, who are initiating the Congregation of the Little Brothers of the Sacred Heart - the name chosen by Père de Foucauld for the community he had so longed to form. They recently went into hermitage in « the Sahara. The natives seem to have been much interested in them, and on the day of their arrival their leader offered them a great dinner in the Arab fashion. The next day he returned, brought them breakfast, and personally conducted them on

a tour of the tombs of the Moslem marabouts in the vicinity. The French military commander of that sector of the desert has stationed an officer at El Abiod, where the Brothers are residing, so that they shall not be alone, and has given orders for the improvement of the trail which connects El Abiod with the headquarters of the sector. A motor ambulance with a physician visits once a month the dispensary which the missionaries are establishing.

In the appendix to the *Life of Père de Foucauld*, by René Bazin (1921), and in the English translation, full details are given of the Association, the definite formation of which was so near his heart during the last years of his life. He had drawn up the rules as early as the year 1909, and he abridged and simplified them in 1913 and again in 1916. They are inspired by his conviction that Christian nations in general, and the French in particular, have a great responsibility in regard to the heathen or Mahommedan peoples under their sway, and that hitherto they have not taken this responsibility seriously enough. It did not seem to him sufficient to ask alms and prayers for this intention. He wanted the greatest possible number of Catholics to bear the infidels always in mind, to have a "missionary spirit." "They will get it by a seriously Christian life which will maintain this thought and make it pass into action. The means to arrive at this sincere, profound, and active Christianity is to bind ourselves to a rule, and organise ourselves into an Association."

Père de Foucauld believed that each mother-country should be called upon to form such an Association, for the conversion of their own infidel populations.

His plan was approved first in 1909 by Monseigneur Bonnet, Bishop of Viviers, and by Monseigneur Livinhac, the Superior-General of the White Fathers, and then by Cardinal

Amette, in 1919, and has been joined by both communities and individuals.

About This EBook

The text of this ebook is taken from the booklet *Charles de Foucauld*, by M R Hoste. The edition used was published by the Catholic Truth Society in London, England in March 1936.

The cover image is a photograph of Saint Charles de Foucauld taken in 1915, photographer unknown; it is the last known photograph taken in his life. The image was swiped from [Wikimedia Commons](#).

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